



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

-The Rebirth of Fallujah-

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Less than two years ago Fallujah was known as a city of death. Notorious as one of the most violent places in al Anbar province, the heart of the violent Sunni insurgency, its houses and businesses had collapsed into rubble, civic leaders were murdered in the streets, and its citizens cowered behind locked doors.



Leslie Sabbagh and family group in Ameriyah Feris, Anbar Province.

All that's changed now. During the last 12 months, the city has reinvented itself, a rebirth that is nothing short of astonishing. Courage, commitment, and hard work have wrested Fallujah from the clutches of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and other criminal elements bent on overthrowing its elected leadership and imposing a terrorist regime.

In the six months that I've served here as the public diplomacy officer with the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) embedded with the Marines of Regimental Combat Team 1, I've watched the city rebuild itself from the ground up. In every neighborhood residents are refurbishing damaged battle-scarred buildings or razing them and starting fresh.

Boom Town

The main city street, well-known to the Marines and Soldiers who fought and died in fierce house-to-house battles as "Route Fran," bustles with construction. Over the months I've watched from our hulking M-RAP (mine resistant ambush protected) vehicles as workers create city parks from the dusty, mortar cratered streets. Today, artisans install gorgeous turquoise, cream, and orange glass doors, windows, and trim on elegant three-story homes. Precious glass, an unthinkable luxury in a place where combat might occur, is proof the Fallujans believe this fragile peace will hold. The early morning sun splashes their iridescence across decorative mud-brick walls—luscious color in this dusty, tan city.

Our team, especially those who have been here a year and longer, delight in the soaring real estate market—the cost for a new Fallujah home on the old Route Fran skyrocketed from \$120,000 to \$250,000 this past year.

On a beautiful late summer evening, residents stroll and chat. Haji Hussein's, a food chain renowned for its grilled lamb and Biryani (roasted chicken served on a platter of fluffy white rice), does a brisk take-out business and men linger over their chai (tea) and cigarettes at newly reopened cafes. Open-air markets offer freshly butchered lamb, blue and pink hajabs (women's hair coverings), soccer balls, and linens. That the residents feel comfortable enjoying the cool of the evening, shopping, dining, visiting, after so many painful, terror-filled months behind locked doors heartens us all.

And major facility construction, some of which is funded by the GOI, is moving along. Take, for example, the new, high-tech Fallujah General Hospital, slated to open in December. It is a marvel of modern Iraqi architecture and ancient Arab know-how. We've watched it soar from ground level to a complex multi-storied facility that perfectly fits its surroundings.

The advances made in reconstruction and growth are matched stride for stride in Fallujah's city council and mayoral chambers. From a handful of cowed men, the council has grown to dozens of civic leaders, representing the entire Fallujah District—Garmah, Ameriyah-Feris, Saqlawiah—all championing their constituents' interests. It's safe to say that rule of law governs now in Fallujah.

A fragile peace

This peace and prosperity has been hard won—by the Marines and Soldiers who fought bitter street battles; the residents who turned, at their own peril, against AQI; the brave men and women who answered the call to lead when that commitment often meant death or grievous injury for them and their families. We at Anbar 1 (Department of State's name for the ePRT) have worked alongside the residents and our Coalition Force colleagues with a sense of awe and privilege.

It's true that Department of Defense and USAID projects funnel reconstruction and development money into Fallujah District's economy, but the area's resurgence is based on much more than funds. Take the recent Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC) success of al Anbar, for example. The turnover of the province to Iraqi Security Forces (SF) could never have happened without the Marine's vigilant patrol and mentoring of the local Iraqi Police and SF. They have developed a relationship based on trust and friendship over months.

This relatively secure environment laid the foundation for our work at the ePRT. We only engage outside Camp Fallujah when the Marines, usually Personal Security Detail Punisher, move us. The first lesson to learn about Fallujah is that nothing good gets done without personal relationships. Our face-to-face encounters anchor everything we do. The successes we enjoy with the farmers, health care personnel, educators, business owners, media, and leaders are grounded in the strength of our personal relationships.

Six months on, I count city council leaders, tribal sheikhs and their families, and the journalists of Radio Fallujah among my colleagues and friends. It has been an honor and privilege to know and work with them.

In the end, what's at issue in Iraq is not whether the initial conflict was justified, but how our two nations move forward—I hope and trust we can do that as friends.

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